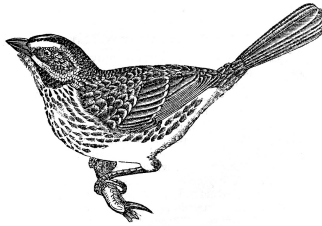


a book of
sparrows

vol. 1



haiku by

dick whyte

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Foreword

by Laurence Stacey

In one of the earliest conversations of our friendship, Dick explained to me that understanding the nuances of haiku requires that we approach things with a mind to “not only examine them... but to become them.” Although I have studied haiku poetics for nearly a decade, it is this idea that consistently reminds me to seek sincerity in my own work. I also believe this idea is central to understanding the poems in *A Book Of Sparrows*.

As a classical image in haiku, the sparrow often evokes thoughts of lightness and humble perseverance. Classical poets, such as Matsuo Bashō, were interested in elevating “mundane” or commonly seen animals like sparrows into the “realm of the poetic.” Kobayashi Issa depicted the tiny bird as a constant companion in the joys and hardships of this floating world. Similarly, the sparrows of Dick’s poetry are present in both innocuous and deeply contemplative ways. In some poems, the sparrow is a mentor:

summer grasses—
little sparrow
teach me to fly

In other poems, the sparrow becomes a focal point for recognizing and attempting to respond to social injustice:

too poor for
this world, a sparrow
out of song

Although each of these poems frames the sparrow in different ways, what links them is Dick's sensitivity and desire to overcome the anthropocentric "gaze" that treats small creatures such as sparrows as little more than "phone line ornaments." Each of the poems in *A Book of Sparrows* seeks to challenge this kind of binary thinking and move the reader into a space where the voice of a small bird is as present and relevant as the poet who watches and engages them in poetic dialogue.

As a poet who studies with Dick, I am continually amazed by his ability to redefine his own poetic voice. These poems represent the shaping of that voice through years of study, as well as the personal triumphs and struggles that we all encounter. Dick always reminds me that poetry emerges from the process of "becoming" and it is my hope that readers of *A Book Of Sparrows* will be inspired to undertake this process for themselves.

Nov. 2016

A Book Of Sparrows

by Dick Whyte

sparrow
in your eyes . . .
hovering

I always wrote about sparrows. I don't remember when or why it started. Maybe it was pragmatic. I like to write about things close at hand, and on any given day I am bound to see some sparrows. At the same time, the more I wrote about sparrows, the more I learned about sparrows. Not as objects of scientific knowledge, but as existential beings who share the same world as me. And the more I wrote about sparrows the more metaphorical potential they gathered. Not that sparrows became a metaphor for anything in particular, but that they came to reside in my poetic landscape, as conceptual confidants. And the more I wrote about sparrows the more I felt an affinity for them that I struggle to put into words. Perhaps it began as poetic affectation, but now it is a part of who I am: *when I am lonely I spend time with sparrows.*

The haiku (and occasional tanka) in this book are presented more or less chronologically. I attempted other arrangements, but diverging from the order in which they were written seemed to damage the interrelationships between verses. While each poem was composed with the intention of being read independently, hopefully they also work as a series of linked poems, building up different

speeds and intensities when assembled together (in twos or threes, in bundles or clumps, in *packs*).

In one sense, this book charts my journey through English language haiku. Starting with some of my earliest efforts and ending with some of my most recent, it maps the various ways in which my approach to haiku has transformed over the past 8 years. By leaving the poems in chronological order I hope the lived time between the writing of each poem can be felt, in some small way: the blank space of the page becoming a field of potentiality from which the poems might unfold. It is not important how much time actually passed between the poems (a moment, an hour, a day, a month, a year) but rather that each haiku remains in process, both changing and changed by the verses before and after it (a plateau rather than a poem: *always in between*).

In another sense, the poems could be read as if they were about the same sparrow, as parts of an experiment with narrative fiction in which the relationship between a sparrow and their poet-narrator-companion is recorded day by day in poetic fragments.

Simultaneously, all these sparrows are multiple: sometimes they are me, sometimes they are people I love, sometimes they are those whose lives are effected by prejudice and hate and oppression. And of course, sometimes they are just sparrows. More than this: they are just sparrows and metaphorical sparrows at exactly the same time. And they are neither. To get to the heart of the sparrow is not to ask what a sparrow is or is not. The heart knows nothing of ontology. To find the heart we must encounter the sparrow not as it is being, but as it becomes and belongs, in all its effortless particularity.

Over the course of this book I hope that the reader can, as I have tried to do, move from the consideration of sparrows as objects in the world (from the outside, in which sparrows are linguistically *de-scribed*), to the consideration of sparrows as a metaphor for human subjectivity (from the inside, in which sparrows are *pre-scribed*), to the consideration of sparrows as an intersubjective process of becoming (from the inside to the outside and back again, in which sparrows are *in-scribed*). To become poet is to become sparrow (metaphysically, rather than metaphorically).

Of course, this book can also be read as a collection of 70 fairly disparate poems which just happen to all be about sparrows. I don't mind, in any case, how it is read. Yet, I feel something is gained by knowing how the order was decided. And while the meaning of each poem cannot be entirely defined by these possibilities alone, I hope the various gaps and potential linkages between poems offer the reader multiple entry points into the becoming and belonging of sparrows . . .

Xoxo

little sparrow
singing so happily,
i envy you

on the fence
one after another,
sparrows

looking up a sparrow looking down

out of work—
i share my lunch
with a sparrow

all that sound
from a single sparrow—
winter morning

weaving
in and out of traffic,
a sparrow

a sparrow hops
puddle to puddle,
day moon

trading poems
back and forth—
sparrows

economic recession—
the sparrows dine on
cherry blossoms

the cry
of a sparrow's child—
still feeling
winter
in your eyes

reading
his poems
all afternoon
sparrows hop from
branch to branch

sparrow's chatter—
half asleep
we make love

after
a long absence,
sparrows

empty sky—
a sparrow chirping
not chirping

what joy!
having nothing to do
sparrows

translating
Issa's death poem—
sparrows

election year . . .
politicians know nothing
of sparrows

minimum wage i envy the sparrow

new homeless laws,
the sparrows too
go hungry

first blossoms—
at least the sparrows have
something to eat

winter sky—
the sparrow doesn't know
i'm black

sparrows
fighting over my crusts,
again he explains
trickle-down-theory
as if i just didn't get it

it's true
i despise all these haiku,
whatever
every sparrow
flies like a pro

deep spring . . .
a sparrow knows
the way

the sky,
becoming a sparrow
becoming me

what do i know
of war, little sparrow . . .
sculpting clouds

separating
slums from suburbs . . .
sparrow's flight

what do i know
of a sparrow's heart?
drifting clouds

daily walk sparrows speaking in tongues

cloud moving sparrow moving sky

recession,
two sparrows sharing
a worm

a flock of linguistic sparrows

benefit cuts,
nobody asks what the
sparrow thinks

teaching
the sky to sing . . .
a sparrow

as ancient
as a sparrow's heart—
falling plums

waiting
the sparrow and i—
plum blossoms

attacks on the poor—
a sparrow too, treading
through cloud

cloudless sky,
the sparrow eats
me whole

summer grasses—
 little sparrow
 teach me to fly

the nest
the sparrows make,
of your hair

in amongst sparrows sparrows

homeless,
the sparrow i was
no longer

this morning
you were gone, sparrows—
tracing clouds

what sky am i just a sparrow song

too poor for
this world, a sparrow
out of song

deep in debt . . .
i ask the sparrow
for a song

little sparrow,
the sky i am
no longer

autumn rain—
somewhere, a sparrow
is singing

into winter,
everything a sparrow
doesn't know

hey sparrow,
can i have some
blossoms too?

what do you
dream of, sparrow?
autumn rain

autumn chill—
wherever you are, sparrow
is my home

little sparrow,
the sky is a mighty
long way

tree to roof
roof to tree,
sparrows

little sparrow,
the world a little better
with you in it

little sparrow are you lonely too?

little sparrow,
just for a moment
you and i

does it sing?
does it tweet?
sparrow

dusk,
a single sparrow sings
the loudest

sparrows out of sky out of rain

sharing a snack
the sparrow and i—
onion blossoms

corner garden,
the blackbird stays
the sparrow goes

all lined up
two three four three . . .
sparrows

maybe a finch
maybe a sparrow,
deep spring

into the hedge
out of the hedge,
sparrows

poking its face
out of the hedge,
baby sparrow

summer ends
deep in the hedge,
a sparrow

cloudless sky,
the sparrow full
of itself

big sky,
one sparrow
left behind

in the sky
in my heart,
sparrows

